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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effectiveness of a writing center in improving student writing. All Composition 121 instructors except those who taught in the writing center were included. Students (1519 were enrolled in 69 sections of Composition 121) and instructors were randomly placed into three groups: Group I, the experimental group; Group II, the current practice group (business as usual); and Group III, the control group. The goal of Group I was to get students into the writing center as often as possible. The instructors of Group II encouraged their students to visit the writing center often, but did not require it. The instructors of Group III did not include anything about the writing center in their syllabi nor did they encourage their students to visit the center. All instructors in all three groups were asked to keep daily attendance records. Results indicated that the correlation between the grades in Composition 121 and the number of visits to the writing center seems statistically significant--the average grades were statistically significantly different between the group that visited the writing center and the one that did not. No D's or F's were reported from the group of students who attended the Writing Center 10 or more times. Also, of the total number of students who withdrew from Composition 121, more students were from the control group than the other two groups. A warning is issued, though, not to draw conclusions from the data because the results are not causal, only relational. Better students tend to be more persistent in seeking out assistance. Nevertheless, it looks like mandating attendance in the writing center does help. (Four pages of data, a writing center evaluation sample form, and a 16-item response summary are appended.) (CR)

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ED 419 233

Researching the Effectiveness of a Writing Center

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

An on-going issue for writing center directors is how to provide data which supports the effectiveness of a center in improving student writing. Most of us as directors can cite anecdotal evidence of student success, and we can also provide numbers to show that students are using the writing center. More difficult is the attempt to substantiate that students who utilize the center's services are more likely to write better in their classes and less likely to drop classes where writing is assigned. As more and more colleges and universities look for ways to cut budgets and require more valid evidence that programs are working, writing center directors find themselves constantly on the defensive. In a community college where the writing center is often looked upon as being primarily developmental, the director may even need to find ways to prove that the writing center successfully serves more than the underprepared student. Although the research project is described in this paper, this researcher has concluded that qualitative evidence is much clearer and cleaner than quantitative evidence. Too many variables, such as an open-door policy, general knowledge about the Writing Center, and the manner in which the study was conducted, prevent any substantial conclusions.

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METHODOLOGY

Most students visit the Writing Center for help with Composition 121 assignments, so my program director and I thought that this group would be our most likely research target. We met with our institutional researchers to design the project. All Composition 121 instructors except those who taught in the Writing Center were included. The sections and instructors were randomly placed into three groups. Group I was the experimental group. These instructors were asked to require their students to work in the Writing Center, record attendance, and monitor the Writing Center work through the monthly reports provided by the Writing Center. Their goal was to get their students into the Writing Center as often as possible. They took their students to the Writing Center for a tour of the services the first week of classes. Then their students were required to take a computerized objective test which assessed the student's ability to recognize and correct mechanical errors and to work with a tutor on a graded paper. Then the student's actual errors were linked to the scores on the assessment. They were also encouraged to bring rough drafts in for tutor feedback. Group II was the current practice group (business as usual). This group took the Writing Center tour. The instructors encouraged their students to use the Center but did not require visits. Group III was the control group. The instructors of this group were not to include anything about the Center in their syllabi nor to encourage their students to visit the Center. However, they were instructed not to deny access to the Center. If students asked about the Center, the instructors could talk about its services, but they were requested not to volunteer information or to require their students to go. All instructors in all three groups were asked to keep daily attendance records so that we could look at the impact of the Writing Center on attendance and retention.

When instructors were told about the study and which of their Comp. 121 sections were in what group, we received little resistance except from Group III instructors who complained about not being able to advise their students about the Writing Center, especially those who needed extra attention. As the semester progressed, several even confessed to me that they "forgot" and gave Writing Center information to their students.

After the twentieth day of classes, the class rosters were considered permanent and the students tracked. To better track students we asked instructors to tell us who had officially or unofficially dropped after the 20th day. We compared that list to those who had attended the Writing Center. Midway into the semester we sent a letter to instructors from Group I asking them to give us the names of any students who had dropped or quit coming to class. Thirty-three students were reported as non-attending or dropping. Of those students only 10 had been in to take the assessment and only three of those 10 had come in for the second visit.

To keep track of the students in the Writing Center, we color-coded their folders. We already had a good record-keeping system, so we fine-tuned it to fit our project. Our secretary kept a list of the section numbers, the instructors, and the groups they had been assigned to. When Comp. 121 students first came into the Center, they were asked who their instructor was, the section, and the reason for coming in. If they were from Group I, their folders were given a green dot. Students from the other groups had the usual folder filled out. Group III were not distinguished if they wandered in. At the end of each month, we sent a report to all of the instructors so that they would have a record of their students' attendance in the Center. The totals for each group

were taken from 20-day rosters. We had a total of 69 sections of Composition 121. Each section had a maximum of 24 enrolled students. 1519 students were enrolled in Composition 121. Of those enrolled, 601 students visited the Writing Center; 918 did not. Out of the 601 students who visited the Center, 51 withdrew from the class (8.3 %) and 40 failed (6.6%). Of the 918 students who did not visit the Center, 170 withdrew (18.5%) and 125 failed (13.6%).

INTERPRETATION

At the end of the semester, we discovered some initial facts by pulling information from our records and looking first at the selected sections of students. Group I, the mandated group, had a total of 474 students from 23 sections of Composition 121. Of these 474 students, 378 students visited the Writing Center within the first month of classes. Out of the total number of students, 71 students dropped the course. Of those 71, only 44 or 61.97% had visited the Writing Center for an average time of 69.8 minutes. 38.03% or 27 of the 71 students who dropped never came into the Center.

Other significant initial data gained from the study considers student persistence and success. Out of the total number of students who withdrew from Composition 121, more students were from the control group than the other two groups. We can also note that over one-third of the mandated students did not go to the Writing Center. If those students had attended the Writing Center, we can surmise that many of them might not have dropped. Of the mandated students who dropped but did visit the Writing Center, over 50% spent a minimal amount of time in the Writing Center, only taking the assessment test and/or spending less than fifteen minutes with a

tutor. Thus, since the students who dropped from the Composition 121 sections in Groups II and III had minimal Writing Center contact, we can, furthermore, assume that mandating Writing Center attendance and the tutor contact time together may have an effect on student persistence. Of the total number of withdrawals (239) only 25% (60) of the students had any Writing Center contact. How many of those students would have persisted and been successful in their Composition 121 class if they had visited the Writing Center and worked with a tutor?

When our Institutional Research analyst sifted through the evidence, she discovered that the students did not stay in their groups; in other words, they did not follow the group parameters which we had set. Therefore, the analyst combined the three groups into one. Of the total group 59% never visited the Writing Center, 13% came to the Writing Center once, and 28% came to the Writing Center more than once. By comparing these statistics to grades received, she noted that there is a significant correlation between the number of visits and the amount of time that a student spends in the Writing Center with the grades received and the successful completion of the course--both in Composition 121 and Composition 122. This correlation is especially true for Composition 121. In fact, one might conclude that the more visits, the higher the grade. Not attending the Writing Center correlates to low grades. No D's or F's were reported from the group of students who attended the Writing Center ten or more times. However, our analyst warned us not to draw conclusions from this data because the results are not causal, only relational. As she noted, "It could well be that the better students are the ones who will avail themselves of all the services, not that using these services makes them better students."

At this point I would like to reflect on the significance of this data. First, getting clean data is difficult. I agree with David Wark in his 1975 study that variables are impossible to control. Thus, gathering sufficient reliable information to make a valid assessment is unrealistic. We know that many of our Comp. 121 students are introduced to the Writing Center in a variety of ways not even connected to the course. Counselors talk about the Center, information is in the college course catalog and on the semester schedule of classes, instructors outside of the composition program include Writing Center information in their syllabi or talk about the Center to their classes, some of these students took a developmental English class where the Center was emphasized, and, of course, students hear about the Center from other students. All of these facts can definitely hinder or help controlling groups. Furthermore, there may be a significant correlation between the success of a student and the number of visits to the Writing Center with the type of student. Better students tend to be more persistent in seeking out assistance thus they may receive higher grades. Nevertheless, it looks like mandating attendance in the Writing Center does help. It won't bring all students in but probably more so than if nothing is said or just a simple recommendation is given. Also, the number of return visits to the Writing Center does relate to the grade received and successful completion of the class.

As an important part of the study, an evaluation of the Center's services was given to all of the students who came in during the semester. We started requesting the evaluation just after midterms. All students coming into the Writing Center after October 20, 1993, were given an evaluation and asked to fill it out and leave it in a box provided in the Center. Over 325 students responded to the survey. One factor I would have changed when conducting the survey would

have been to tie it more closely to the research project. I should have asked the instructors in the sections in Group I to administer the survey to their students. Instead, we randomly surveyed all students coming to the Writing Center following mid-terms. We placed a survey in each student file which meant that students from numerous classes, not just Composition 121, were questioned. However, we can infer that many of the students surveyed were Composition 121 students so some of the data may be significant. First, we can note the over-all positive tone of the students surveyed showing us that mandating student attendance did not alter attitude toward Writing Center effectiveness. We can also see a significant relationship between students receiving tutor help, their attitude toward the Center, and their desire to return for more help.

CONCLUSION

As we began our research project, I believed, rather optimistically, that we could easily prove our effectiveness. However, my goals of the project, my director's objectives, and our institutional reseachers' plans did not completely concur. I learned that it is easy to lose sight of the original goals when numerous people are involved. I also learned that variables, such as student access, instructor attitude, and the common knowledge of the Writing Center's services, problematize the statistics, making them unreliable. Although Martha Maxwell in her source book *Evaluating Academic Skills Programs* lists criteria from which one may choose to judge a program's effectiveness, she does not always address these issues. (A1-3) She talks about gathering quantitative evidence, such as numbers of students using a center, statements of student satisfaction, information about who referred students to center, and long range criteria like retention rates, GPA improvement, user attitude, and graduation or transfer results. Although this information is somewhat revealing and may aid in budget rationale reports, my inclination is

to believe that the qualitative evidence is the strongest. Recent literature has supported the case study as a valid tool for studying the success of a writing center. Maxwell lists not only the case study but also "open-ended questionnaire responses, observations, clinical examination/diagnosis, expert opinion, logs/diaries, anecdotes about student experience, interviews in depth, and testimonials" (A1-6).

I would still like to document the success of our Writing Center. I know anecdotally that students who attend the Writing Center return to tell us they have succeeded in their composition classes, and they cite us as the reason. I know, too, that we are not necessarily the only reason but definitely a factor.

In the future, I might begin by surveying the Composition 121 instructors to find out to what degree they inform their students about the Writing Center. We know that some instructors only mention the Writing Center in their syllabus; others, along with the syllabus description, bring their students into the Writing Center for a tour of its services; still others mandate or reward their students for Writing Center attendance. We could then pull student information from our mainframe to see if there is any connection between student success and the extent to which instructors emphasize the Writing Center.

As we look for ways to prove the effectiveness of our writing centers to get funding or just to stay in business, research studies are one method. However, they can be time consuming and unreliable. Nevertheless, generally speaking, the results can be one important source of

evidence, and, combined with qualitative methods of evaluation, they can definitely support some of those facts which we who have directed writing centers already know to be true. Colleges that provide writing centers provide an effective service to students who want to write better.

Works Cited

Maxwell, Martha. *Evaluating Academic Skills Programs: A Source Book*. Kensington, Maryland: M. M. Associates, 1991.

Wark, D. M. "Raising Student Outcomes by Means of Learning Skills." Paper presented at the International Conference on Improving University Teaching. 1975

PROJECT TITLE: JCCC Writing Center Research

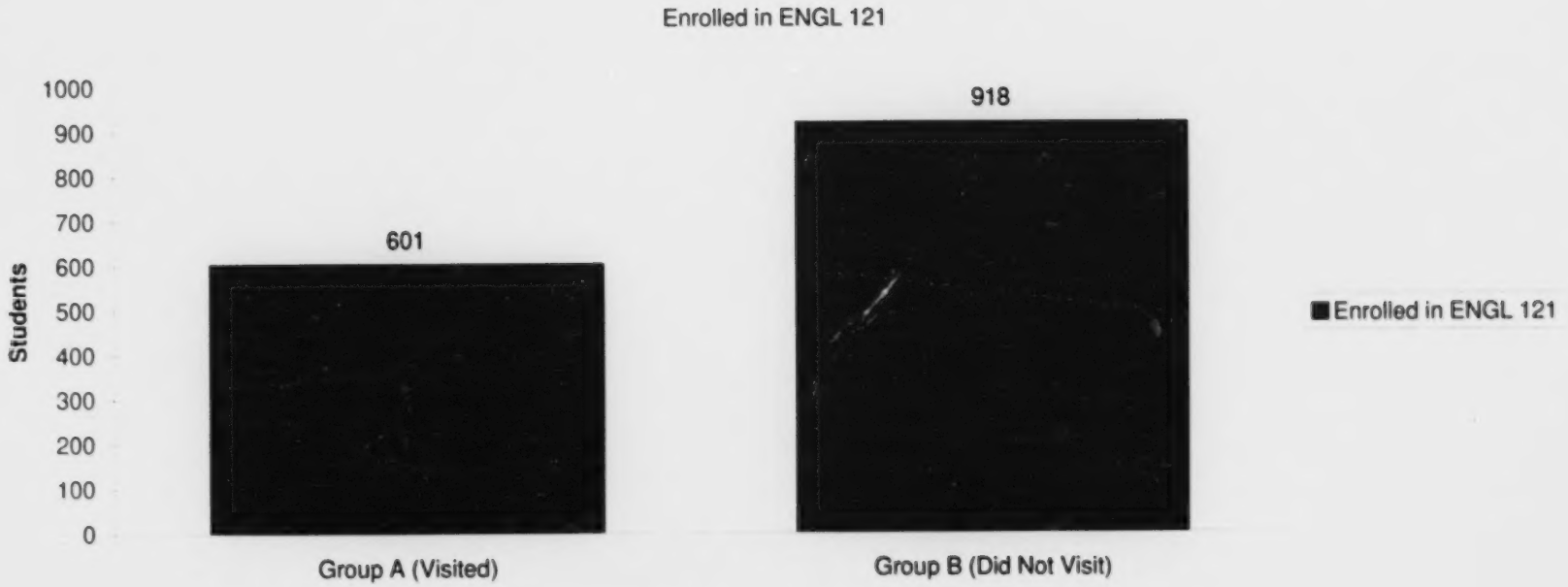
TOPIC: This research project was launched to determine if mandating student attendance in the Writing Center would impact student stuccess. Our hypothesis was that mandated and recommended Writing Center attendance early in the semester improved retention and impacted grades received in both writing courses and courses across the curriculum where writing is a significant component.

DATES: The research took place in the fall, 1993 and initial results were presented at the spring National Writing Centers' Association conference, 1994.

PROCEDURE: Because the Johnson County Community College Writing Center serves the general population of the college, not just the underprepared or developmental student, Composition 121 (Comp. I) was used as the pilot course for the research. We met with our institutional researchers to design the project. All Comp. I instructors except those who taught in the Writing Center were included. The sections and instructors were randomly placed into three groups. Group I was the experimental group. These instructors were asked to require their students to work in the Writing Center, record attendance, and monitor the Writing Center work through the monthly reports provided by the Writing Center. Their goal was to get their students into the Writing Center as often as possible. They took their students to the Writing Center for a tour of the services the first week of classes. Then their students were required to take a computerized objective test which assessed the student's ability to recognize and correct mechanical errors, and to work with a tutor on a graded paper so that the assessment test could be linked to the student's actual writing skills. They were encouraged to take rough drafts in for tutor feedback. Group II was the current practice group (business as usual). This group took the Writing Center tour. The students were encouraged to use the Center but not required. Group III was the control group. The instructors of this group were not to include anything about the Center in their syllabi nor to encourage their students to visit the Center. However, they were instructed not to deny access to the Center. If students asked about the Center, the instructors could talk about its services but were requested not to volunteer information or to require their students to go. All three groups were asked to keep daily attendance records so that the impact of the Writing Center on attendance and retention could be studied.

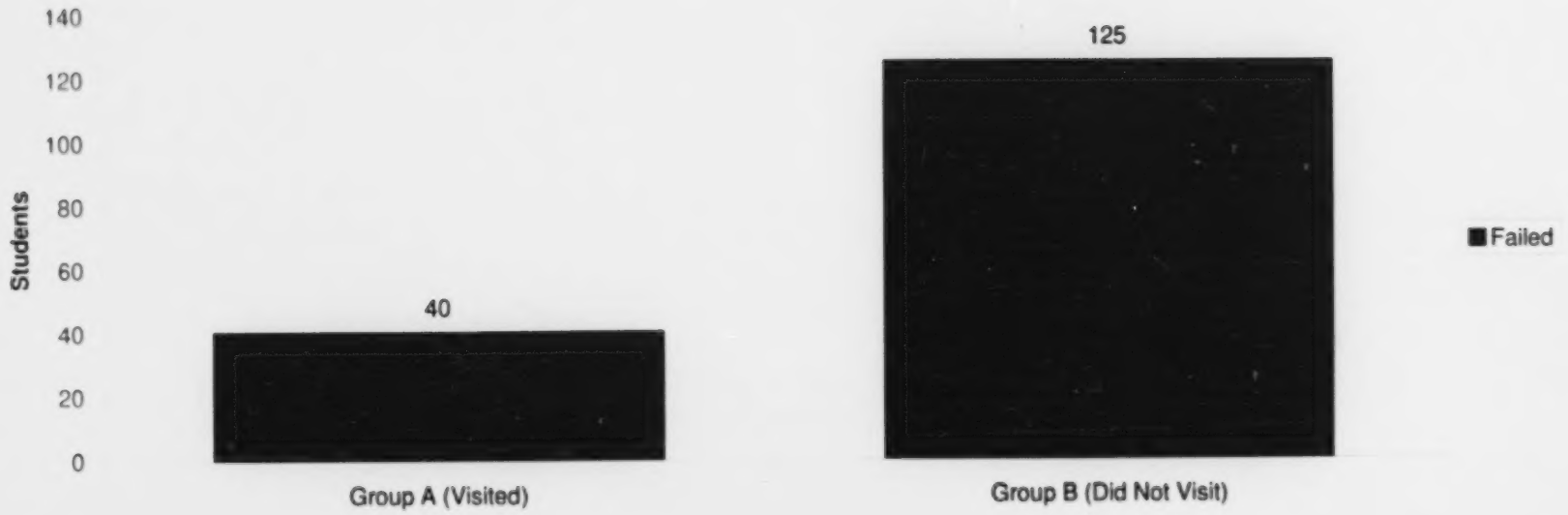
FINDINGS: Conducting research in an open Writing Center is complex and difficult. Student knowledge of the Center makes controlling groups impossible. Variables, such as instructor interference, student persistence, and student access, keep us from being able to draw significant conclusions from the data gathered. Nevertheless, the correlation between the grades in Composition I and the number of visits to the Writing Center seems statistically significant. Additionally, the average grades in Composition I were statistically significantly different between the group that visited the Writing Center and the one that did not.

DISSEMINATION: Presentations at the National Writing Centers Association Conference, 1994 and 1995. A manuscript is under preparation.


Enrolled in ENGL 121
1000
900
800
700
600
500
400
300
200
100
0
Students
601
918
Group A (Visited)
Group B (Did Not Visit)
Enrolled in ENGL 121

Failed

Failed



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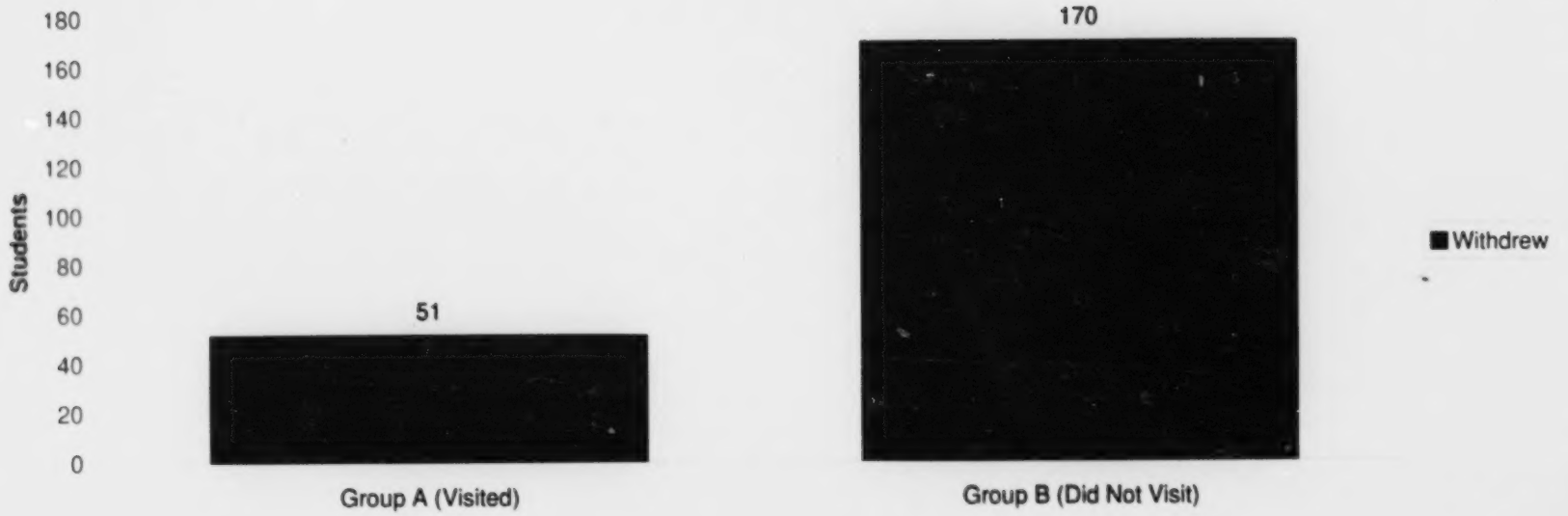

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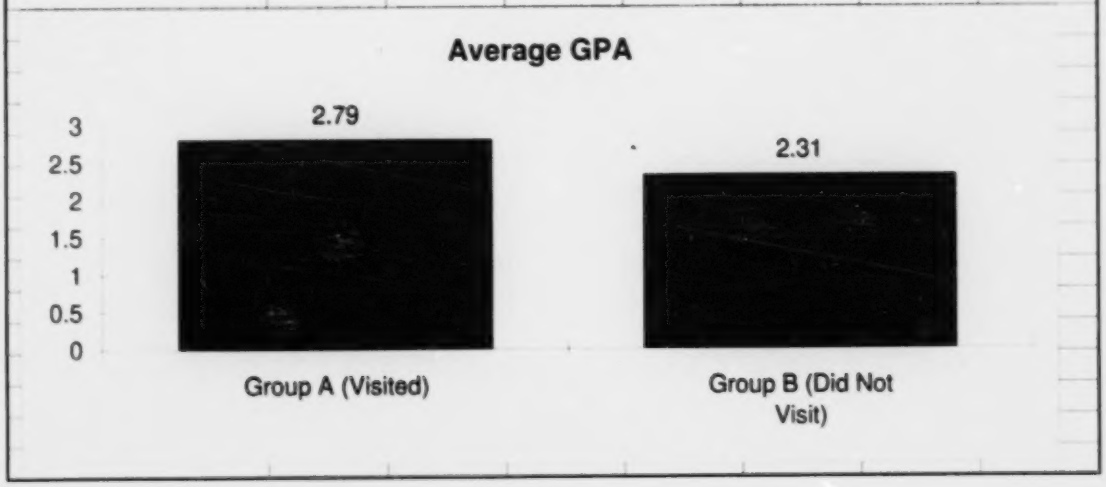
		Average GPA
Group A (Visited)	2.79	
Group B (Did Not Visit)	2.31	



Semester_____ Year_____

Writing Center Evaluation

Directions: Checkmark line, circle answers; or write short answers where appropriate.

1) **Why did you come to the Writing Center?**

a) composition class

b) literature class

c) other class(name_____)

d) Writing Center course

e) Use computer

f) Use reference books

2) **How often have you been to the Writing Center this semester? (approximate)**

1

2-4

5-7

8 or more

3) **Circle your primary purpose for coming to the Writing Center.**

a) Help with a paper

b) MicroLab Assessment

c) General help with writing problems

d) Help with mechanics

e) Help with essay test answers

f) To pick up a handout

g) To do computer program

h) To use computer for revision

i) Other

4) **How did you find out about the Writing Center?**

a) suggested by instructor or counselor

b) required by instructor

c) suggested by friend or another student

d) came on tour

e) read in college bulletin

5) **Have you come to the Center before this semester?**

a) yes _____

b) no _____

6) **Have you recommended the Center to others?**

a) yes_____

b) no_____

7) **What Center materials have you used?** (Circle all that apply)

a) handouts

b) computer programs

c) books

d) sample assignments

e) Grammar Hotline

f) Other: Please list

8) **If the purpose of your visit was to look at sample assignments, did you find what you were looking for?**

a) yes_____

b) no_____

If no, let us know which class and instructor, and we will pass along that information.

9) **Circle any of the following specific helps you received in the Center:**

a) help with interpreting an assignment

b) help with getting started

c) help with reading--understanding material

d) dissatisfaction over grade

e) spelling or vocabulary help

f) review before a test or a take-home exam

g) preparing for competence requirements (placement tests)

h) help on rough draft

i) other (explain)

10) **Have you enrolled in any of the one-credit module courses?**

a) yes_____

b) no_____

c) I did not know about the Writing Center courses___

d) I plan to take a module in the future___

11) **Do you feel that the materials and instruction you received in the Center were appropriate and clear?**

a) inappropriate, unclear

b) adequate

c) very appropriate, very clear,

12) **Were they effectively presented?**

a) yes_____

b) no_____

13) **Did you work with one tutor or with several?**

14) **Check all words that describe your tutor.**

_____aloof	_____good listener	____not helpful
_____annoyed	_____helpful	____patient
_____approachable	_____impatient	____poor listener
_____competent	_____incompetent	____prepared
_____effective	_____ineffective	____prompt
_____friendly	_____late	____unprepared

15) **Please indicate the effect of your Writing Center visit(s) on the following items related to the writing process.**

1) confidence as a writer
a) increased
b) decreased
c) no discernible change
d) does not apply

2) ability to focus ideas and organize
a) increased
b) decreased
c) no discernible change
d) does not apply

3) skill in revising or proofreading work
a) increased
b) decreased
c) no discernible change
d) does not apply

4) composing clear sentences
a) increased
b) decreased
c) no discernible change
d) does not apply

5) mechanical skills generally (spelling, punctuation, etc.)
a) increased
b) decreased
c) no discernible change
d) does not apply

15) **Would you use the Center again?**

_____yes _____no

16) **Would you recommend the lab to someone else:** _____yes _____no
If you answered *no*, please explain why.

Give us a few comments if you wish.

1.	**Reasons for coming to the WC**	**Response**	**N=326**	**Percent**
	Composition Class	245		75.20%
	Literature Class	9		2.80%
	Other Class	43		13.20%
	Writing Center Class	9		2.80%
	Use Computer	19		5.80%
	Use Reference Books	15		4.60%
2.	How often visit the Writing Center	Response	N=329	Percent
	One time	13		3.95%
	2-4 times	190		57.80%
	5-7 times	76		23.10%
	8 or more times	51		15.50%
3.	Primary purpose for visiting the WC	Response	N=478	Percent
	Help with a paper	224		46.90%
	MicrLab Assessment	31		6.49%
	General help with writing problems	64		13.40%
	Help with mechanics	72		15.10%
	Help with essay test answers	3		0.63%
	To pick up a handout	23		4.81%
	To do computer program	25		5.23%
	To use computer for revision	25		5.23%
	Other	13		2.72%
4.	How did you find out about WC	Response	N=387	Percent
	Suggested by instructor or counselor	209		54.00%
	Required by instructor	92		23.80%
	Suggested by another student	28		7.24%
	Came on class tour	49		12.70%
	Read in college bulletin	10		2.58%
5.	Have you visited WC before this semester	Response	N=328	Percent
	Yes	154		47.50%
	No	175		53.40%
6.	Have you recommended the WC	Response	N=327	Percent
	Yes	265		81.00%
	No	62		19.00%
7.	What WC materials have you used	Response	N=554	Percent
	handouts	209		37.50%
	computer programs	152		27.30%

	books	54		9.69%
	sample assignments	77		13.80%
	Grammar Hotline	42		7.54%
	Other	21		3.77%
8.	Specific help in WC	Response	N=518	Percent
	Interpreting an assignment	65		12.50%
	Getting started	90		17.40%
	Reading/understanding material	24		4.63%
	Dissatisfaction over a grade	14		2.70%
	Spelling or vocabulary	64		12.40%
	Review before a test or a take-home test	4		0.77%
	Preparation for competence requirements	7		1.35%
	Help on rough draft	224		43.20%
	Other	28		5.41%
9.	Enrolled in WC module	Response	N=371	Percent
	Yes	20		5.39%
	No	284		76.50%
10.	Materials & instruction/appropriate & clear	Response	N=319	Percent
	Inappropriate, unclear	1		0.31%
	Adequate	74		23.20%
	Very appropriate, very clear	245		76.50%
11.	Effectively presented	Response	N=315	Percent
	Yes	310		98.40%
	No	6		1.90%
12.	Work with 1 tutor or several	Response	N=279	Percent
	One	108		38.70%
	Several	169		60.60%
	None	2		0.72%
13.	Check all words that describe your tutor	Response		
	Aloof	4		
	Annoyed	6		
	Approachable	156		
	Competent	174		
	Effective	219		
	Friendly	274		
	Good Listener	205		
	Helpful	260		
	Impatient	9		
	Incompetent	5		

Ineffective	5	
Late	2	
Not helpful	7	
Patient	153	
Poor listener	2	
Prepared	142	
Prompt	96	
Unprepared	2	

14. Effect of WC on Student's Writing Process

	Response	
Confidence as a writer	N=319	
Increased	222	
Ability to focus ideas and organize	N=318	
Increased	205	
Skill in revising or proofreading	N=315	
Increased	237	
Composing clear sentences	N=311	
Increased	233	
Mechanical skills	N=307	
Increased	221	

15. Would you use the WC again

	Response	N=322
Yes	322	
No	0	

16. Would you recommend the WC

	Response	N=308
Yes	306	
No	2	